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Sex, Politics, and Silent Black Women: Nadine Gordimer's *Occasion for Loving*, *A Sport of Nature*, and *My Son's Story*

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ACCORDING to Nadine Gordimer, "the two greatest drives in people's lives, the two most important things, are sex and politics."¹ The connection that she perceives between sex and politics inspires her focus on lovemaking between black males and white females in *Occasion for Loving* (1963), *A Sport of Nature* (1987), and *My Son's Story* (1990). She claims that "there may be a particular connection between sexuality, sensuality, and politics uniquely inside South Africa. Because, after all, what is apartheid all about? It's about the body. It's about physical differences. It's about black skin, and it's about woolly hair instead of straight, long blond hair, and black skin instead of white skin."² Physical love for the skin and hair of the Other cuts at the root of racism, but, in a sexist culture, it may also pit one woman against another. For example, when the interracial relationship is white female/black male, it raises the issue of the liberation and empowerment of black females.

Gordimer's three novels that focus on interracial couples—*Occasion for Loving*, *A Sport of Nature*, and *My Son's Story*—reveal a growing awareness of black women. In the first two novels these women are a silent or barely audible presence, almost totally ignored. However, in *My Son's Story* the black wife tolerates silently her husband's lengthy affair but then secretly develops a life of her own. To the total astonishment of her son and husband, she is suddenly imprisoned for her revolutionary activities. Yet, particularly in the first two books and to some extent in the third, Gordimer presents each of the love affairs of the white women with black, married men as a utopian occurrence in such a racist environment. In *My Son's Story*, Gordimer even makes the affair an idyllic relationship between equals. However, these idyllic white/

black love affairs expose in all three novels the white women's lack of bonding with the black wives and lovers of these men. Until Hannah confronts her lack of sisterhood near the end of *My Son's Story*, the white female characters' love for the black men, victims of racism, does not extend adequately to the black women, victims of both racism and sexism.

Gordimer's depiction of both white women and black women is basically the same in her third novel, *Occasion for Loving*, and her ninth novel, *A Sport of Nature*. However, the portraits of women are considerably different in her tenth novel, *My Son's Story*. In this novel the white mistress is no longer driven only by her instincts, and the black wife has become a risk-taking revolutionary.

Ann and Hillela, the white women in the first two novels, are among those Gordimer would call "lightweights." Gordimer observes that the people who are politically effective are often not, in fact, the "serious-minded" ones. On the contrary, people who seem to be "lightweights"—and not at all the types to be effective in a revolutionary situation—may prove to be more successful.³ She makes this remark in the context of discussing Hillela, the seemingly "lightweight" protagonist in *A Sport of Nature*. Gordimer calls Hillela a "lightweight" because her interactions with black revolutionaries are primarily motivated by physical attraction, not political commitment or sympathy with their cause.

Indeed, Hillela finds political discussions meaningless and therefore boring, because what people say cannot be trusted; individuals' statements about their beliefs are belied by their unwillingness to act. While growing up in South Africa, Hillela experienced "so much emotional and moral prevarication" that she trusts only her own body and feelings.⁴ Gordimer's response to this quality in Hillela is sympathetic. In Gordimer's words, "The bed, at least, is honest. You feel pain; you feel sexual pleasure."⁵

Gordimer's fascination with such a "lightweight" obviously goes back many years: the prototype for Hillela is clearly Ann Davis, the protagonist in *Occasion for Loving*, written twenty-four years earlier than *A Sport of Nature* in which Hillela appears. Ann amazes her host and hostess, Tom and Jessie, in the same way Hillela amazes her aunt and uncle, Pauline and Joe. The older couples are "serious-minded" white liberals who do their best to support the cause of black liberation through political activities. They are shocked by these young women who innocently challenge racism through their bodies.

As a teenager, Hillela tuned out the steady stream of political talk that enveloped her at Pauline and Joe's. Although they pro-

vided her with a home and family when she needed both and although she went with them to demonstrations and played protest songs for them at their meetings, none of that touched her in a meaningful way. Indeed, she chose at one point to work as a go-go girl rather than continue to teach black children on Saturdays.

Although Hillela had never seemed to white activists to be politically or spiritually "serious-minded,"⁶ ultimately she was more successful than they in creating a role for herself in the new Africa. Toward the end of the novel she becomes the wife of a head of state who is also Chairman of the Organization of African Unity. In that capacity she attends the official ceremonies for the founding of the "new African state that used to be South Africa."⁷ By then, in her forties, she goes by the African name Chiemeka and wears a traditional African outfit. Although white, she creates a totally new identity for herself, relinquishing all connections with her past in order to fit in.

Gordimer has created many "serious-minded" characters of the political left—for example, the parents of Rosa Burger in *Burger's Daughter*, Hillela's cousin Sasha in *A Sport of Nature*, and Sonny and Hannah in *My Son's Story*. Like Gordimer's earlier character, Ann Davis, Hillela is a very different kind of radical—one who relies on her body, not her mind, to guide her. Hillela is fascinated with Whaila's "skin and hair" in the central love scene in *A Sport of Nature*: "She examines his body minutely and without shame, and he wakes to see her at it, and smiles without telling her why: she is the first not to pretend the different colours and textures of their being is not an awesome fascination" (184). By responding positively rather than negatively to physical differences, Hillela is a social misfit within a racist society. In an interview Gordimer notes that in South Africa, "the whole legal structure is based on the physical, so that the body becomes something supremely important."⁸ The narrator of *A Sport of Nature* makes this comment about the white Hillela and her black lover:

The laws that have determined the course of life for them are made of skin and hair, the relative thickness and thinness of lips and the relative height of the bridge of the nose. That is all; that is everything. The Lilliesleaf houseparty is in prison for life because of it. Those with whom she ate pap and cabbage are in Algeria and the Soviet Union learning how to man guns and make bombs because of it. He is outlawed and plotting because of it. Christianity against other gods,

the indigenous against the foreign invader, the masses against the ruling class—where he and she come from all these become interpretative meanings of the differences seen, touched and felt, of skin and hair. The laws made of skin and hair fill the statute books in Pretoria. (184)

Indeed, the lovemaking in both *Occasion for Loving* and *A Sport of Nature* was illegal in South Africa; only by the time Sonny and Hannah make love in *My Son's Story* are the interracial pair not performing an illegal act. Hence, in *My Son's Story* the focus of the coupling is no longer upon challenging racism; it occurs in a racist context but examines the impact of a long-lasting affair upon children, upon family life, and upon political commitment and loyalty.

In *Occasion for Loving* and *A Sport of Nature*, however, the focus is upon the ways in which such couplings between blacks and whites are a defiance of apartheid and the public mores. Sexual attraction leads the couples to risk legal punishment for love. Those who can sustain love despite racist laws that forbid such relationships provide hope for those who observe them, even when the participants seem crazy, foolish, or naive.

In *A Sport of Nature*, Hillela's cousin Sasha calls love that defies racist taboos "utopian." He claims: "Instinct is utopian. Emotion is utopian." He believes that "without utopia—the idea of utopia—there's a failure of the imagination—and that's a failure to go on living. It will take another kind of being to stay on, here [in South Africa]. A new white person. Not us. The chance is a wild chance—like falling in love." According to Sasha, reformers like his parents, Pauline and Joe, are not radical enough; they lack imagination. Reformers, says Sasha, "want to adapt what is. You move around . . . bumping up against . . . the same old walls. If you reform the laws, the economy defeats the reforms. . . . If you reform the economy, the laws defeat the reforms" (194). Although he spends years in prison for organizing black unions, he includes himself, not just his mother and father, in this critique. Yet he never loses faith in nor love for Hillela, his cousin, whose incestuous lovemaking with him cost her her home. It is she who is the "wild chance," the sport of nature, the "new white person." It is she who envisions and attempts love for a black man and the creation of an "African family of rainbow-coloured children" (223). But as Sasha says, "utopia is unattainable" (194). Indeed, Hillela's utopian dream proves not to be realizable, because her one great love, Whaila, is assassinated. However, "without aiming for [utopia]—taking a chance!—you can never hope even to fall far short

of it" (194). Both utopian lovers, Hillela Capran and her prototype Ann Davis, have long ago steeled themselves against the loss of love and happiness. They are both experts at gracefully "moving on"⁹ when their emotional survival requires it.

Gordimer gives us more psychological explanation for Hillela's behavior in *A Sport of Nature* than she does for Ann Davis's in the earlier novel *Occasion for Loving*. Like Ann, Hillela has no reason to cling to the past; she is free to change her identity anytime circumstances warrant it. Neither she nor Ann has ever had a home of her own. About Ann, we are simply given this statement: "She had never had a house of her own, but all over the world she saw places where a house might be, and to which she would never go back."¹⁰ Hillela is homeless, rejected by her mother and father, her school, and her two aunts and uncles. Ironically, it is because of sex that she is rejected in each case. Her mother abandoned her to join a lover in Mozambique; her father chose to live with his new wife, Billie, rather than Hillela when he knew he could not have both; Hillela's school expelled her for associating with a "coloured" boy; and her Aunt Olga, for the same reason, turned her over to her other aunt, Pauline. Pauline might have coped with a black lover but could not tolerate Hillela's incestuous relationship with her cousin Sasha—Pauline's son. Even when Joe, Hillela's uncle, provides her with money to leave the country with Andrew Rey, she experiences Joe's help as yet another rejection. Once in Dar Es Salaam, she is deceived and abandoned by Rey. She is left with little more than a yellow bathing suit, a pair of jeans held together by a safety pin, and sandals with a broken strap. Significantly, through all of this, Hillela's only protest was a temper tantrum she had when Olga announced that she was giving her to Pauline (16). Hillela broke a two hundred-year-old Imari cat, but Olga never understood why (17).

Neither Ann nor Hillela ever expresses gratitude, as if the generosity of others were simply due. Ann leaves Tom and Jessie, who gave her a home for months, without saying goodbye or thank you. Hillela never writes to those who have helped her. Neither woman looks back. Sensually and sensuously, they both live for the moment. Of Ann, we read: "The present was the only dimension of time she knew" (93). A psychiatrist calls Hillela "so healthy it appalls me!" He perceives her as living "without a past before yesterday and a future beyond tomorrow . . . unlike those bowed under the past and in such anticipatory dread that they were, as she rightly observed, unable to look up and eat, learn, fuck in the present" (110). Ann, like Hillela, trusts and understands only her

own personal experience. The narrator describes Ann thus: "She had no lasting feelings about the abstractions of injustice; like many healthy and more or less beautiful women, she could only be fired to pity or indignation by what she saw with her own eyes" (91). Hillela tells Arnold, who is one of her lovers: "I can know what happens to me." Arnold is aghast and exclaims: "What are you saying? You don't trust anything but your own body? It's a nice one, my god, certainly—but I don't believe you know what you're saying" (143).

When Ann realizes that Gideon Shibalo is "aware of her," she initially responds only because "her sex and her beauty were her talent, her life's work" (104). Both she and Hillela are proud of their bodies. Not surprisingly, both are excellent dancers. Ann "could dance with her whole body and use muscles that most white women do not know are theirs to command. . . . She could have danced until she dropped" (95). Similarly, when another benefactor, Udi, observes Hillela dance: "She did more than follow; she moved as one body with the man she had never seen before in her life. Watching her, Udi had the impression she might never stop, that she might . . . *dance her life away*" (158). Responding through the senses only, indifferent to the cultural differences and political ambience, both Ann and Hillela seem incapable of racism.

Their sensuousness leaves them untainted by the repulsion sometimes created in others by either racial or sexual difference. A description of Ann touching Gideon foreshadows the love scene between Hillela and Whaila (with its "different colours and textures" [184]): "the dark positiveness of his skin, the mattness of it, the variations like markings shading one part of his body in difference from another—some nerve in her had become alive to it. She dwelt on it in secret as soon as she touched him" (189). Gideon knows when she finally loves him. He sees in her a change: "So she loved him, she was really his woman, this bright creature; he felt it under his hand when he was making love to her now, he felt it when she walked toward him in a room, or passed him food at table. But at the same time safety was gone out of their relationship: each had put himself in the other's hands" (260).

Hillela's marriage to Whaila is similarly perfect. She loves him totally. Her lovemaking with him is selfless to the point of annihilating her identity. He is "dismayed" by "her lack of any identification with her own people . . . , he who lived for everything that touched upon the lives of his; there was something missing in her at such times, like a limb or an organ." Yet "he saw their own

closeness as a sign; the human cause, the human identity that should be possible, once the race and class struggle were won" (215). Cut off from her family, she was free to achieve this utopian oneness.

Hillela's disturbing tendency to give up her identity is foreshadowed in her childhood by her casually discarding her own name. As a young girl at boarding school, she called herself Kim rather than her Jewish name Hillela; she wanted to fit in with the Susans and Clares (1). At the end of the novel, she is difficult to trace because her public name is the African one. Furthermore, she is willing even to annihilate her body—her whiteness. When she has a baby with Whaila, she is delighted "not to have reproduced herself" (202). She is pleased that her daughter Nomzamo (named for Nomzamo Winnie Mandela) is black like the father.

Finally, for a brief time, she has her own family. She creates her own little paradise, her own private utopia when on Sundays she lies with "her man and their baby" in a scooped out "bowl of sand whose circle had no ingress for anyone or anything else and no egress by which oneself could be cast out." These outings become a ritual: "And each Sunday fitted over the last in an unbroken and indistinguishable circle" (199)—that is, until a cholera warning appears on the beach and until Whaila is shot, her second baby dies (224), and her remaining daughter is dispatched—at her second husband's request—to boarding school (293). "Her namesake who looks out from magazine covers, unsmiling with charming haughtiness, nostrils dilated, is her only child" (224). An internationally known model, Hillela's daughter is another female whose talent lies in using her body. Ironically, although Nomzamo is the daughter of a South African revolutionary, she is an exotic success in the Western, capitalist world.

In the earlier novel *Occasion for Loving*, Ann Davis loses some of her political innocence through her relationship with her black lover. Ann understands racism when she sees how a white garage man looks at her lover, Gideon. She tells Jessie (her white South African hostess) and Gideon: "You know, when the man in the garage looked at Gid, and I stood next to him seeing Gid at the same time, it wasn't the same person we saw" (284). Jessie realizes that Ann has just begun to understand what it is all about. But Gideon wants to protect Ann from her own awakening. He does not want her to change—to "acquire the cunning, stubborn and patient temper of a political rebel. To him she was herself, her splendid self, a law to herself, and limited as little to the conventions of opposition as to the conventions of submission. She loved

him; she did not love him *across* the colour bar: for her the colour bar did not exist" (284–85). Even Jessie, with all her political awareness, finds this innocence and purity to be part of Ann's charm. One suspects that both Gordimer and Jessie are envious of Ann's naiveté. Knowledge and consciousness can be painful.

In *A Sport of Nature* Hillela, like Ann, cannot remain totally innocent. She experiences two painful awakenings. The first occurs in Ghana when she is wheeling her baby near a public square shortly after the fall of Nkrumah. She sees a toppled statue "smashed upon the ground." Suddenly she understands power and fear. The power of the people could shake and topple "those who wielded it" (198). Her second and more intense awakening occurs when Whaila is shot and her own life is spared only by an open refrigerator door (220). Who could have prepared her for this? "Who knew about this? Who could bear to know about this?" (223). Then she realizes that Whaila never belonged to her, to the "rainbow-coloured family," to "the perfect circle." Instead "he belonged to the crowd outside and he died for them" (240). Therefore, it is time to remember about "moving on": "Whaila is dead. There have been others. There will be others" (223). But there will never be another Whaila for her, and she gives up her utopian vision of taking a rainbow family back to a free South Africa. She realizes that it is too soon. "The real rainbow family stinks" from lack of water and food, from dysentery and death (260); hers was just a dream. However, the day of liberation does come, even without the many children she had wanted. Standing beside her second husband as a new nation is born in South Africa, she thinks of it, not as her own country, but as Whaila's.

Hillela's predecessor, Ann Davis, had been forced to see that the time for love between a black man and a white woman had not come. Whereas she and Gideon had recklessly displayed their relationship at first, as they return from Jessie's summer cottage to Johannesburg they realize that they are at risk, that they must be secretive. Ann senses the danger and is frightened. Moreover, Jessie notes that Ann has more than just the police to fear. One day, driving through the township from which Gideon comes, Jessie looks around: "The veranda outside the place was littered with the torn-off sheaths of mealie-cobs and children with mouths and noses joined by snot watched from the gutter. A mule was being beaten and a huge woman, strident-voiced, oblivious of her grotesque body and dirty clothes, bared her broken teeth at a man." Jessie realizes that "Gideon had someone he loved here; parents, perhaps; friends." She knows that by "taking Gideon,

Ann was claimed by this, too, this place where people were born and lived and died before they could come to life" (286). Jessie feels fear at the thought of being allied to this kind of life and hopes she will not communicate it to Ann. Ann will never be able to fit in. What is worse, Jessie knows that one day at the beach house when Gideon had not shown up, Ann had wished him drowned; despite her love, she had been feeling unable to cope with the situation.

Before long, Ann leaves Johannesburg not with Gideon as planned but with Boaz, her husband. She is unable to live with Gideon in this social, economic, and political context. Unlike the later character Hillela, who marries an African head of state and fits in, Ann Davis is unable to feel comfortable within Gideon's black world. Nor can Gideon follow Ann into her white world.

Unfortunately, Ann's abrupt departure destroys Gideon, who succumbs to alcoholism and, consequently, becomes dysfunctional personally, professionally, and politically. How can white people help the blacks, Jessie wonders. Their very touch seems destructive. "What's the good of our friendship or her love?" (288). When, much later, she sees Gideon Shibalo in a drunken stupor at a party, he cries: "White bitch—get away" (307). Because of Ann's defection, the breach between black and white has widened.

Yet Gordimer makes a change in this scenario when she rewrites the story in 1987. Despite the similarities between Gordimer's two female characters, Ann Davis in the 1963 novel, *Occasion for Loving*, and Hillela in the 1987 novel, *A Sport of Nature*, Gordimer chooses to provide a visionary, futuristic ending for the later novel that foresees a time when the breach between white and black will heal. The ending of *A Sport of Nature* is utopian. Ann's inability to fit in is replaced by Hillela's ability to fit in as the wife of an African president who is, moreover, head of the Organization of African Unity. In the words of her first husband, "With her, it was already one world; what could be" (215). However, there is a flaw in this picture of the future: black women are still not in the foreground.

In Gordimer's three novels depicting a white female/black male relationship, the displacement of the black African women who have relationships with these men is barely mentioned. The black women in these books rarely speak, and when they do, no one seems to listen. With each novel, however, the tension heightens between Gordimer's admiration for the white women's color-blind love and the presence of the African wives and mistresses behind

the scenes. The persistent yet silent presence of these black women increasingly proclaims their oppression. Only in the most recent of the three books—in *My Son's Story*—is the perspective finally feminist, exposing the consequences of sexism as well as racism.

Nevertheless, the sexism interwoven with racism is revealed to some extent in the earlier novels. In *Occasion for Loving*, for example, Gideon treats Ann with much more respect than he extends to his black women. He has not seen his wife for three years; recently, he has not even sent money to her for their child. He considers that he has "outgrown" her and is shocked to realize that she still views him as her husband:

he saw, fascinated, that she did not think it impossible to regard as "husband" a man she had lost touch with three years ago; she accepted what any housegirl or cook accepted—that a black woman cannot expect to live permanently with her man and children; she must shift about and live where and how poverty and powerlessness allow. He might have been an indentured labourer, away from home for long periods out of necessity. Three years' absence had no significance for her so far as the validity of marriage was concerned. (183)

There is another woman in Gideon's life—Ida, the black woman with whom he sleeps from time to time. When he talks with his friend Sol at his home, she is a silent, eavesdropping presence. "If they joked, she felt witty and lolled back on the bed; if they were at each other, hammer and tongs, she was excited; when they spoke of what she thought of as 'taking over,' she felt an intoxicating superiority" (135). She is there and she reacts, but she is not expected to participate. Black men speak and are politically active; to them she is just part of the environment while she cooks a meal and cares for Gideon's clothes.

The black women in *A Sport of Nature* are also quiet. One, Sela, has a master's degree in science; married, however, to a British man, she chooses not to teach at the university (210–12). The black wives of Whaila and the General—Hillela's two husbands—are also mentioned. The black men are free to womanize as they carry on their revolutionary activities, because their black wives are too powerless to object. Hillela is fully aware of these hidden women and their children, but she sleeps with and marries their men all the same. Each time she marries, Hillela knows that her polygamous husband is not hers alone. She is his most important

woman; yet, she is still just one of them. White women are the intellectual companions of black men. They know black women obediently continue to serve these same men.

We never learn how Whaila's black wife responds to his relationship with Hillela. But Gordimer offers the perspective of the two black wives of the General who later becomes president. "The first wife resented [Hillela] but scarcely had any opportunity to demonstrate that resentment" (319). The second wife treats Hillela with respect but "cannot make a sister out of a white woman." Hillela is a "usurper, a foreigner" (321). The black South African women, burdened not just with racism but with sexism, so lack power that, amidst all the talk of liberation in *Occasion for Loving* and *A Sport of Nature*, they are still virtually ignored and left to suffer wordlessly. Neither they nor their revolutionary husbands discuss plans for their liberation. However, Gordimer has given the black wives a few lines in *A Sport of Nature*, whereas the black women had no voice in the earlier book. Finally, in *My Son's Story* the black wife Aila is still silent, but she has taken control of her life.

In *My Son's Story* Aila, the black, middle-class, dutiful wife of Sonny, knows about his long-lasting affair with Hannah Plowman, a white blond. Nevertheless, like her son and daughter, she remains submissively silent about it. Her body does offer at least a nonverbal protest. She continues to make love with Sonny but, as he finally realizes, she fakes "her pleasure" (242).

This book ends with a surprise, however. Suddenly Aila is arrested and imprisoned for storing weapons and possibly carrying guns across the border to black South African revolutionaries. Her egotistical and patronizing husband, Sonny, is so convinced that she is incapable of revolutionary activity that he is sure she has been arrested in error. In fact, her revolutionary activities, disguised as visits to her daughter in Zambia, have been even more dangerous than his; and, out on bond, she flees the country. Almost simultaneously Sonny's white mistress, Hannah, leaves the country to take another job. Hannah not only departs, but she never contacts Sonny again.

Hannah would have left to take the job in any case; still, she would not have cut off all communication with Sonny had she not, in a moment of revelation, finally seen Aila as a sister:

Suddenly the blue of Hannah's eyes intensified as it did with tears. Whether Aila was a revolutionary or not, whether she had joined the struggle—and who should not rejoice at her choice if she had?—or

been naïvely led by the daughter to acts she didn't understand, or was a victim of trumped-up charges and Security Police plants, the quiet, beautiful wife with the curtain material she'd sewn now used to wrap hand-grenades and mines was betrayed, betrayed. (235)

Sonny, Hannah's lover, is very disturbed by this sudden bonding between his two women. He felt "intruded upon. . . . She had no right to weep for Aila!" (235).

Ultimately Sonny is left without wife, mistress, or daughter, all of whom are serving the cause of black liberation elsewhere. Blaming Hannah, not himself, for his having lost Aila's love (243), he remains behind with his son, Will. Sonny and his promiscuous—and often misogynous—son are gradually being forced to confront the changing roles and self-concepts of black women. These women may not be so docile at home in the future. Assuming more power, some may be, like Aila and her daughter, silently but surely taking their place in the struggle for liberation.

Ironically, Sonny's affair with Hannah had left Aila free to carry on her clandestine activities. Given his behavior, she was also free, when the time came, to leave the country to escape punishment. To his surprise, she had not been quietly waiting for his return; she had been busy creating a new life for herself—a life quite independent of his.

Both racism and sexism begin with the body. Through black/white sexual attraction and love, Gordimer challenges the laws that had forbidden interracial relationships under apartheid. The possibility of love between blacks and whites in turn undermines all the barriers that obstruct contact and thereby privilege the white population. Gordimer's challenge to racism in *Occasion for Loving* and *A Sport of Nature* minimizes, however, the plight of black women. In those two books the powerlessness of black African women within their own families is not a political issue.

In *My Son's Story*, a voice finally protests what the black male/white female relationship does to the black female. But the voice is that of a male—a son whose loyalty to his mother initially leads him to condemn his father's deceit and infidelity. Aila, the mother, is a strong woman, capable of risking her life for political ideals. Yet at home, in her domestic world, she does not stand up to her unfaithful husband. Knowing that his secrecy is not simply related to his political activities, she still does not question him; she never challenges his freedom to have a mistress. Is her silent, stoical tolerance of her husband's neglect of her and her children a realistic portrayal? Or is it just the product of Gordimer's belief that

the concern of black women is only "the oppression under which all blacks live." Is Aila's silence meant to suggest that most or that all black South African women accept—not only in theory but even in practice—that "the feminist battle must come afterwards."¹¹ In a 1982 interview, Gordimer acknowledges that black women are "very much exploited" by their own men but claims that for them (and even for her) "the exploitation by whites" has to take precedence.¹²

But can racism and sexism be separated and convincingly segregated or do "race and gender institutionally reinforce one another," as Elizabeth Meese insists?¹³ Meese reaffirms Virginia Woolf's statement in *Three Guineas* that "the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected; . . . the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other."¹⁴ Because "multiple, coincident oppressions" exist, Meese argues that "the struggles against racism, classism, and sexism" must be "simultaneous rather than serial" (65). Black African females have little means to resist the hurtful behavior of sexist, misogynous males. The silence of the black African women in *Occasion for Loving*, *A Sport of Nature*, and *My Son's Story* reveals a serious social problem that Gordimer's focus on the white women's love for black males practically ignores. The emphasis on racism with little or no analysis of sexism has too often permitted white women to love black men without any sense of responsibility for the well-being of black women. Furthermore, ignoring the sexism of black South African males prolongs black women's silence about the double burden they endure. Worst of all, this fear of feminism permits the black male to ignore the racism instilled within him (against his own people) that interferes with his respect for black females.

Ann, Hillela, and—until the end—Hannah are as insensitive and indifferent to the lives of black women as many whites are to the lives of black men. While challenging racist attitudes toward black males, their attitudes and behavior reveal racism as well as sexism in their lack of identification with black females. One wonders to what extent Gordimer has been as blind as her protagonists. She has depicted much more frequently and empathized far more with black men than with black women. Until *My Son's Story* Gordimer's lack of interest in feminism¹⁵ has permitted her to ignore in her novels the enormity of the burden of racism and sexism under which black women spend their lives.

Finally, in *My Son's Story*, although the black woman herself fails to protest, the irate son who tells the story does rage at the consequences of his father's self-centered behavior. Yet as much as Will

scoffs at his father's sexual behavior, he envies him and wishes his father would allow him into the act: "He's not moving aside, off women's bodies, for me. I needn't think, because I'm as tall as he is and I've got the same things between my legs he's got . . . [that] he needs to give over to me. The old bull still owns the cows, he's still capable of serving his harem, my mother and his blonde" (94–95). Moreover, Will, like his father, has bought into the racist image of the ideal woman: "I pretend, in dreams, that I'm doing things to them, the blondes in full-page spreads I tear out" (46). Worst of all, protective as Will is of his mother, he ultimately decides she is after all "a woman"—"some sort of sister to my father's blonde, since he's fancied them both" (187).

Furthermore, Will's description of independence from his mother reveals a shocking degree of misogyny: "She mustn't think she can count forever on the child who used to put himself to sleep stroking his lips with the tail of her long black plait. The plait's cut off, she's shorn, I'm a man. I thrust myself into women as my father does" (252–53). By repressing his feminist insight, rejecting his mother, and reducing women to sex objects, Will is declaring his allegiance to the patriarchy. Moreover, his allegiance is well rooted in his visceral response to the body of the female—the Other. He is both attracted to and repulsed by his father's white mistress. Responding to his "mad wild" sexual desires, this adolescent thinks of her as "Forbidden pig. Pink pig." He imagines that his father "wants him to see her, see what he enjoys and be guilty with him of what he feels because I understand it in myself. A bond. *Tied*. Father and son more like good buddies" (94).

The philosophy of domination that underlies sexism is the same one that underlies racism. Sexists, like racists, are attracted to yet repulsed by a body different from their own; they feel, therefore, a desire to intimidate and render submissive. Gordimer links her power to describe human sexuality to her political concerns because, as she says, it all has to do with the body. To be at ease with the physicality of ourselves and others erases fears and thereby lessens our desire to dominate.

Gordimer suggests that through physical love we can experience the sacredness of the Other. But ideal lovemaking takes place not only between equals but also within a context of social, political, and economic equality. Ironically, in Gordimer's three novels the whiteness of the female seems to serve as a balance to the maleness of the black. The status of race (her whiteness) can counterbalance the status of gender (his maleness) in a society still

racist and sexist. Can we move more quickly toward solving the social, political, and economic situation of the oppressed by loving the body of the Other, which we have too often feared or despised? Or must we rid society of racism and sexism (and other forms of discrimination) to make possible a love that truly enriches both individuals. As Shulamith Firestone points out in *The Dialectic of Sex*, "the destructive effects of love" are produced by "an unequal balance of power"; "love demands a mutual [and equal] vulnerability" which cannot exist "in a context of inequality."¹⁶ Perhaps the "lightweights" who follow their senses and the "serious-minded" who organize for political action are two halves of the whole which must respond simultaneously. Indeed, in the most recent of the three novels, the black/white couple shares an intense sexual attraction, an active intellectual life, and a shared commitment to political action. This would be a promising situation but for the fact that Sonny is married, and neither he nor Hannah are ready to take seriously the black female. Fortunately, in *My Son's Story* we see the black woman declare her independence and enhance her status through political action. When she does, Hannah respects her as a sister and Hannah's affair with Sonny is instantly over:

When they lay on that same bed on the floor, close to the earth as they had liked to be, wakeful, the tides of blood flowing down behind their closed eyelids were washing them apart, the red waters of being widening between them. She did not speak but surely he could hear: this won't happen anymore. (235)

Like Aila, Hannah finally rejects the man who fails to understand his own racism (in preferring her whiteness) and sexism (in underestimating Aila). Aila abandons her husband and to some extent even her son because, in a macho if not an emotional way, both of them had already abandoned her. Living in a racist and sexist environment, they had been incapable of truly nourishing or loving her.

Notes

1. Jill Fullerton-Smith, "Off the Page: Nadine Gordimer," *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, ed. Nancy Topping Bazin and Marilyn Dallman Seymour (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 304.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Margaret Walters, "Writers in Conversation: Nadine Gordimer," *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 292.
4. *Ibid.*, 293.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, 292.
7. Nadine Gordimer, *A Sport of Nature* (1987; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 350. Further page references will be cited in the text.
8. Fullerton-Smith, "Off the Page," 304.
9. Nadine Gordimer, *My Son's Story* (1990; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 215. Further page references will be cited in the text.
10. Nadine Gordimer, *Occasion for Loving* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), 244-45. Further page references will be cited in the text.
11. Susan Gardner, "'A Story for This Place and Time': An Interview with Nadine Gordimer about *Burger's Daughter*," *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 167.
12. Robert Boyers et al., "A Conversation with Nadine Gordimer," *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 203-04.
13. Elizabeth A. Meese, *(Ex)tensions: Re-Figuring Feminist Criticism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 65.
14. Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (1938; reprint, London: Hogarth Press, 1952), 258.
15. Gardner, "'A Story,'" 167.
16. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), 130.